

St. Cloud VA

UPDATE

April 16, 2020



A monthly newsletter for Veterans served by the St. Cloud VA Health Care System, and for those who serve them. Send news items and comments to St. Cloud VA Health Care System, Attn: Public Affairs Officer, 4801 Veterans Drive, St. Cloud, MN 56303, or via email to barry.venable@va.gov

Situation Report

The leadership and staff at the St. Cloud VA want to update our Veterans and stakeholders with our current status and future planning. First, we say thanks to our Veterans for their patience. Second, if you need us, call us.

We can assure you, we have plans in place to protect everyone who gets care, visits, or works at one of our facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Veterans are asked to call first before going to a clinic or the urgent care center if they have symptoms of fever, cough, and shortness of breath. Calling first helps us to protect you, medical staff, and other patients.
- Veterans seeking emergency medical care should call 911 or go to the nearest Emergency Department and contact VA within 72 hours.
- We have shifted a significant amount of outpatient care to telehealth and some elective and

non-emergent procedures have been cancelled. This enables Veterans to receive care through minimal contact with staff, resulting in more Veterans being seen, while saving them time and reducing the potential for harmful exposures. Our telehealth use has increased 300% from the same time as last year.

- We are following all recommendations from the VA, CDC and other experts on how to best protect our patients and staff.

We are screening patients and visitors for symptoms and restricting facility access based on the results. Screening includes a few simple questions, including:

1. Have you been tested or diagnosed with COVID-19?
2. Do you have a fever, a new or worsening cough or shortness of breath, or flu-like symptoms?
3. Have you been in close contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19?

During the screening process, anyone with suspected COVID-19 will be masked and put into isolation for further triage.

We are adequately equipped with essential Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and we monitor the status of those items daily.

Prevention is still the best medicine.

Veterans and family members are strongly encouraged to take everyday preventive actions to avoid exposure to COVID-19:

- Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds,
- Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands,
- Stay home if are sick or becoming sick.
- Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.

To date, there are no confirmed COVID-19 cases reported among St. Cloud VA HCS residents or staff. One Veteran, an outpatient, has reported a recent confirmed positive COVID-19 test result which was performed at an area hospital. This individual was last in one of our facilities in early March and was seen and tested by a community provider in early April. We realize that the probability that more of our outpatient Veterans will be exposed to the virus is high. Enrolled St. Cloud VA patients who test positive for COVID-19 as a result of a community administered test are asked to report the results to your PACT Team.

We have COVID-19 testing available. If you think you need to be tested call us. Your

provider will recommend Veterans for COVID-19 testing using guidelines based on many factors, including the severity of symptoms, other existing illnesses or conditions, possible exposure, and other criteria. There's no charge for testing when it is indicated. The average time required for test results is between two to seven days. This timeframe is expected to decrease as testing capabilities expand within VA and the community.

We are actively engaged in planning and coordination with the VA Midwest Health Care Network (VISN 23) and local community partners. The St. Cloud VA has a specific role within the larger VISN 23 response plan. Certain VISN 23 facilities will be designated COVID-19 hospitals, treating Veterans and, potentially, the local population. There is a need to enable capacity at these medical centers to care for potential COVID-19 patients. Other facilities will surge their existing operations to care for more patients, and that's where the St. Cloud VA fits into the plan.

- We are surging our existing CLC operation to care for more patients. Over the past week and half, we have admitted 33 patients from the Minneapolis VA CLC to our CLC. The purpose of the transfers is to enable capacity at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center to care for potential COVID-19 patients. We are refurbishing Bldg. 48-1 to create 24 additional temporary CLC beds, bringing our CLC surge capacity to 249 beds.
- On April 13, we activated an Acute Respiratory Clinic (ARC). As a

temporary measure, the ARC is a “building within a building” into which we route specialized cases, including those with respiratory symptoms, for triage, testing, and dispositioning separately from the remainder of the patient population. An outpatient setting, the ARC operates from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily, mirroring the hours of our Urgent Care clinic. The ARC is a place where we can handle potential cases or Veterans with symptoms needing other primary care services, safely.

- Dependent upon the course of the pandemic our plans may include establishing a temporary Low Acuity Alternative Care Site. This unit is envisioned as a 30 to 36 bed recovery unit for those COVID-19 patients who are in the recovery stage of their illness. These patients would be transferred here from other VISN 23 facilities, other long-term care settings, and, if necessary, civilian hospitals, in order to keep vital ICU and medical-surgical beds in those facilities available for patients in the acute stage of illness.

These planning efforts allow us to take advantage of our unique skill sets—outpatient, mental health, and long-term care services. We will continue to provide primary care and outpatient mental health services, both virtually, at our facilities, and in some cases at Veteran’s homes. We continue to operate the Acute Psychiatry Unit and are adapting the MH RRTP to deliver care to a reduced resident population while also delivering care virtually. We have developed a cohort

admission model for those Veterans with needs that require a residential setting to aid their recovery, and have admitted the first cohort of 5 Veterans.

Taking care of our mental health is essential during this time. VA has mental health services available for Veterans who might be feeling anxious or overwhelmed by COVID-19.

- Veterans can keep their existing mental health appointments and change them to telehealth (phone or video) appointments by sending their provider a secure message through My HealtheVet.
- Veterans can also ask for a new mental health appointment. If they need same-day mental health care—or want to request a new appointment—call us.
- VA has tips for maintaining and enhancing your mental health during the COVID-19 outbreak at <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/coronavirus/>.

During the pandemic, VA is continuing to make community care referrals when needed. We’re currently prioritizing referrals for urgent or other medically necessary care because of COVID-19.

- Some community care providers may be affected by closures, limited services, quarantining, or social distancing based on CDC and local health department guidelines. Veterans should call ahead to confirm an appointment and work

with their community care provider to reschedule any canceled appointments.

- Knowing the extensive impacts on the community health system, VA is extending authorizations for community care referrals. Veterans should continue to work with their community care provider to have their needs met.
- Community care eligibility requirements have not changed. Appointments to see community care providers still need to be approved by VA (except for emergency and urgent care needs), and getting a referral depends on eligibility, type of care, and other factors. [Learn about eligibility for community care.](#)

Clearly, the pandemic is ongoing, and the recovery phase of our planning is yet to come. This is a time for increased vigilance—not panic. Everyone needs to remain alert take steps to stay safe. The tools to do this are readily available. They include following the stay-at-home order and other physical and social distancing measures, and dedication to washing our hands, using hand sanitizer, avoiding contact with people who are sick, covering coughs, avoiding touching eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands, cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched objects and if sick, staying at home.

Veterans—if you need us, call us.

PRESCRIPTION WINDOW PICK-UP CHANGES

PRESCRIPTION WINDOW PICK-UP CHANGES

- EFFECTIVE 4/13/2020 -

Due to COVID-19 safety concerns, please

Call First!



Pharmacy is switching to an all mail-order system.

Please allow 10-14 days for delivery.

*Only **URGENT** prescriptions may be picked up at the Outpatient Pharmacy.

*If you feel your situation is urgent please **Call First**, toll-free at (855) 560-1724 and press option 8.



How to request a refill:

By phone: Make a toll-free call to (855) 560-1724 to place refills.

Online: Request prescription refills online at www.myhealth.va.gov through My HealtheVet. You can view your prescription history and track the delivery status of your package online.

By mail: Complete the request form and mail it to your VA pharmacy.

Pharmacy is switching to an all mail-order system for non-urgent prescriptions. Please allow 10-14 days for delivery. Only urgent prescriptions may be picked up at the Outpatient Pharmacy.

If you feel your situation is urgent please Call First, toll-free at (855) 560-1724 and press option 8.

St. Cloud VA to host Virtual Baby Shower



To honor and support Veterans welcoming new children into their families in 2020, the St. Cloud VA is hosting virtual a baby shower on May 13, from 5 to 6 p.m.

The goal of the baby shower is to celebrate Veteran parents — especially moms — while also increasing awareness of VA's comprehensive maternity care services and to encourage women Veterans to choose VA to support their health and wellness goals, said Amber Willert, St. Cloud VA Women Veterans Program Manager.

"Veteran moms, dads and adoptive parents with babies born or expected in 2020 are welcome," said Willert. "Spouses are welcome to attend, games, gifts and information are all part of the shower."

To attend this event, use the following link:
<https://us04web.zoom.us/j/77083531403>

For questions or more information, Veterans can call 320-252-1670, Ext. 6655.

Women make up approximately 10 percent of the Veteran population in the United States, and nearly half of the nation's 2 million women Veterans are of reproductive age. VA offers comprehensive primary care, prenatal and preconception (pre-pregnancy) care, infertility services, maternity care services and the first seven days of newborn care.

For more information about VA's benefits and programs for women Veterans, visit <https://www.va.gov/womenvet>.

VA releases safe firearm storage toolkit in suicide prevention effort

VA has released the [Safe Firearm Storage Toolkit](#), which was developed in partnership with the [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#) (AFSP) and the [National Shooting Sports Foundation](#) (NSSF), the trade association for the firearms industry. The toolkit guides communities through the process of building coalitions to raise awareness about safe storage practices.

VA respects the important role firearms play in many Veterans' lives and is dedicated to educating Veterans, their families, and communities about how safe storage can prevent suicide. In 2017, firearms were used in nearly half of all U.S. suicide deaths and nearly 70% of suicides among U.S. Veterans. Safe storage can put time and space between an individual and a firearm and help keep Veterans and their loved ones safe during a suicidal crisis.

While service members and Veterans are well-versed in handling and securing firearms, other members of their households may not be. In periods of crisis or heightened emotions, unsafe firearm storage can increase risk for injury. By practicing safe storage before challenging times arise, you can reduce the risk for suicide or injury for everyone in your home.

VA, AFSP, and NSSF invite everyone to download the toolkit, which can help you foster community collaboration to promote safe firearm storage and prevent suicide. You can get started by sharing this with others in your community who you believe would make great coalition leaders. You can also share this on your social media to start a conversation about these issues. By talking about safe storage with others, you can help prevent suicide.

If you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide, contact the Veterans Crisis Line to receive free, confidential support and crisis intervention available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Call 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, text to 838255, or chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat.

Maintaining and Enhancing Your Mental Health and Well-Being During the Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak

Taking care of your well-being, including your mental health, is essential during this time. Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. Many people may experience stress, fear, anxiety, or feelings of depression. This is normal. There are

things that you can do to manage your stress and anxiety:

- Exercise regularly, try to eat well-balanced meals, and [get plenty of sleep](#).
- Limit alcohol.
- Practice breathing exercises and/or meditation. VA has many [free mental health apps for Veterans](#).
- Take breaks from the news (see below for tips).
- Stay connected with others while practicing social distancing (see below for tips).
- Participate in activities or hobbies that you enjoy, or learn a new one.
- Keep your current mental health appointments. VA offers both video and phone telemental health options that do not require you to go to your closest facility in-person should you have a medical concern or need to follow specific social distancing guidelines in your community.
- Learn ways to connect with VA providers using telehealth options and [schedule or reschedule your appointment online](#). If you are requesting a new mental health appointment, please call your [local VA](#) and they will work to arrange an appointment for you. If you need same day access for mental health services, call your [local VA](#) to request this and you will be connected to care.

Also, see these great resources on managing stress and anxiety related to COVID-19:

- [Moving Forward](#)
- [National Center for PTSD Guidance on Managing Stress](#)
- [CDC Guidance on COVID19 Mental Health Support](#)

Avoid Too Much Exposure to News

Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories. It can be upsetting to hear about the crisis and see images repeatedly. If you feel anxious or stressed from the information, struggle to turn off the TV or log off of social media, or [have trouble sleeping](#), you might want to limit the amount and type of news you are viewing. Try to do enjoyable activities, return to normal life as much as possible, and check for updates between breaks.

Stay Connected

During times of social distancing, it is normal to have increased feelings of loneliness, sadness, fear, or anxiety. It is important for everyone to stay connected. Here are some ways to feel more connected:

- Seek support from family, friends, mentors, clergy, and those who are in similar circumstances. While face-to-face communication may be difficult, be flexible and creative using phone, email, text messaging, and video calls. Sign up or join a virtual social network that includes service members and Veterans.
- Keep in touch with fellow Veterans and assist them in navigating this new environment if they are having a hard time. Teach them how to use VA Video Connect through the [VA mobile app store](#) as VA increases virtual health and mental health appointment availability.
- As a Veteran, you have been uniquely trained in emergency response situations. Your resilience and strength can assist others during these times. Connection can also happen when you give back to your community by sharing your expertise and support with family, friends, and neighbors through acts of kindness and volunteer opportunities which will arise.

Stay Informed

- Stay engaged with VA information as it becomes available so you can continue to maintain your health. [VA's Novel Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\) webpage](#) has the most current information and [VA's Coronavirus FAQs](#) page provides answers to many important questions.
- Stay connected of Coronavirus information as it becomes available by visiting the [CDC's Coronavirus](#) page.
- Stay up-to-date on what the federal government is doing in response to the pandemic at the [USA.gov](#) page.

VA extends financial, benefits and claims relief to Veterans

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced, April 3, a number of actions to provide Veterans with financial, benefits and claims help amid VA's COVID-19 response.

“As all Americans come together to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, we want Veterans to be focused on their health and safety,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “That’s why we’re taking action to give those with pending debts, claims and appeals greater flexibility during these challenging times.”

The financial relief actions include the following until further notice:

- Suspending all actions on Veteran debts under the jurisdiction of the Treasury Department.
- Suspending collection action or extending repayment terms on preexisting VA debts, as the Veteran prefers.

For benefit debts, Veterans can contact the VA Debt Management Center at 1-800-827-0648 to make arrangements.

For health care debts, Veterans can contact the Health Resource Center at 1-888-827-4817 to make arrangements.

The benefits and claims relief actions include giving Veterans the option to submit their paperwork late for the following actions:

- perfecting claims
- challenging adverse decisions
- submitting Notices of Disagreement

- submitting Substantive Appeals
- responding to Supplemental Statements of the Case

Veterans requesting claim extensions can simply submit them with any late-filed paperwork and Veterans do not have to proactively request an extension in advance. For added convenience, VA will also accept typed/digital signatures instead of wet signatures on its forms. Those with questions can call 1-800-827-1000.

For Veterans who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and need immediate action on their appeals, as opposed to a filing extension, the Board of Veterans' Appeals will Advance their appeal on Docket (AOD). Click [here](#) to find out how to file for AOD and what documentation is required.

New rules for electronic health information sharing deliver better care

Starting April 17, 2020, your community providers who are in VA’s network and participate in the Veterans Health Information Exchange (VHIE) will be able to securely and seamlessly access your VA electronic health information in order to care for you. Previously, you had to complete a form to authorize this electronic sharing.

This comes as a result of the launch of the VA MISSION Act this past June, when VA expanded Veterans’ access to non-VA health care providers through the [community care program](#). But as VA’s network of authorized community providers grows, so does the need to make sure those providers have access to the health

information they need to deliver decisions about your care.

This positive change will have tremendous benefits. Not only does this electronic sharing help you avoid carrying paper copies of your record between providers, but the secure, seamless exchange of information with the specific providers treating you can dramatically improve your safety – especially in emergency situations.

VA has been using health information exchange (HIE) technology since 2009 to securely share information. Those instances include prescriptions and medications, and for allergies, illnesses and laboratory results when you see providers in other health networks.

This change is a significant upgrade. The VA MISSION Act removes certain restrictions on this kind of electronic sharing, which makes it easier for your providers – in VA facilities and in the community – to make sure your full care team has the information they need to:

- Better understand your health history and be able to focus more time on what is important to you.
- Develop safe, more effective treatment plans.
- Work together to keep you safe and improve your overall health.

Manage your sharing options

You do not need to take any action for VA to start securely and seamlessly coordinating your care via VHIE so that you have a better, safer experience. However, we understand that the idea of sharing

personal health information electronically may be uncomfortable for some Veterans. Like all VA IT systems, VHIE complies with all federal privacy laws including the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). Community health care providers must be a part of VA's approved, trusted network to receive your health information. If you do not want your care team to receive information via VHIE, you may opt out – but doing so means your community providers may not receive your medical record before you receive treatment. This could put you at risk.

There is no deadline to opt out and you can do so at any time. After April 17, you do not need to take any action to allow secure electronic sharing if you have not previously opted out. If you have previously opted out but want to resume sharing, you may also opt back in. Changing your sharing preference will not affect your access to community care through VA. Visit [VA.gov/VHIE](https://va.gov/VHIE) to learn how to manage your sharing options online via [My HealtheVet](#).

We hope all Veterans take advantage of this opportunity to make sure your health care providers have a secure and more complete view of your medical history – helping us provide you with timely, high quality care when and where you need it.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Veterans Affairs Radio Show

Monday, May 4 8:10 -8:30 a.m.
KNSI AM 1450/FM 103.3

Appointments by phone only: Veteran's Law Clinic

Tuesday, May 5 Noon -2 p.m.
Free legal consultation for Veterans by appointment only. This clinic is not for criminal issues. For more information or to schedule an appointment please contact Central Minnesota Legal Services at 320-257-4855 or 800-622-7773.

Virtual Baby Shower

Wednesday, May 13 5-6 p.m.
Celebrating babies born to or expected by Veterans (moms, dads & adoptive parents) in 2020. To attend this event, use the following link:
<https://us04web.zoom.us/j/77083531403>

Appointments by phone only: Veteran's Law Clinic

Tuesday, May 19 Noon -2 p.m.
Free legal consultation for Veterans by appointment only. This clinic is not for criminal issues. For more information or to schedule an appointment please contact Central Minnesota Legal Services at 320-257-4855 or 800-622-7773.

Voices for Veterans Radio Show

Wednesday, May 20 8:10-830 a.m.
WJON AM 1240

Federal Holiday

Monday, May 25
Outpatient clinics and administrative offices, including VA Clinics in Brainerd, Montevideo and Alexandria will be closed. Urgent Care at the St. Cloud VA will be open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

For a complete Calendar of Events, go to <https://www.stcloud.va.gov/calendar.asp>

Quick Reference Phone List

Main St. Cloud VA HCS Phone Number	320-252-1670 or 800-247-1739
TDD User	320-255-6450
Max J. Beilke VA Clinic, Alexandria	320-759-2640
Brainerd VA Clinic	218-855-1115
Montevideo VA Clinic	320-269-2222
Veterans Crisis Line	800-273-8255 Press 1
Homeless Veteran Hotline	877- 424-3838

Billing:

• VA Care	866-347-2352
• Care in the Community (non-VA care)	877-881-7618
Caregiver Support Team	Ext. 7283
Chaplain Service	Ext. 6386
Community Care Referrals	Ext. 6401
Discrimination Complaints	Ext. 6304
Eligibility	Ext. 6340
Nutrition Clinic	Ext. 6376
Transition & Care Management Program	Ext. 6453
Patient Advocate	Ext. 6353
Pharmacy Refill Line	855-560-1724
Privacy Officer	Ext. 6408
Public Affairs Office	Ext. 6353
Release of Information (Medical Records)	Ext. 6336
Transportation	Ext. 7622
TRICARE	844-866-9378
Voluntary Service	Ext. 6365
VA Police	Ext. 6355

Stay in Touch

Visit our Website: www.stcloud.va.gov

Like us on Facebook: www.facebook.com/StCloudVAHCS

Sign up for our automated email service. Visit the St. Cloud VA Website at: <http://www.stcloud.va.gov> and on the right-hand side of the page is a request to sign up for email updates. Enter your email address and you are automatically signed up to receive email updates from our web page. There are also options presented to sign up for updates from other government sites.